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The Effects of the Bolshevik Revolution of Four Russian Composers

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The Effects of the Bolshevic Revolution on Four Russian Composers

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The Bolshevic Revolution in 1917 was the culmination of over fifty years of political and social unrest. For millions of Russian peasants it represented a welcome and just end to an unresponsive, autocratic government. The communism being preached by the Bolshevics promised economic improvements for these oppressed masses, and they needed and wanted such improvements.

But in the minds of the intellectual classes of Russia, the teachers, scholars and artists, the Revolution created a fear. A fear that in place of an unpredictable, stifling autocracy, a government would develop that would completely control even the creative activity of Russian life. And the more they saw of the new government the more their fears grew. For:

> "the new government policy was an attempt to force all the artists of Russia into large unions so their efforts could be channelled directly into the service of the state." 1

Thousands of artists fled the country rather than submit to such stringent controls. Some stayed to protest and were imprisoned or exiled. Others passively accepted the new lifestyle in order to stay in their homeland. The reactions were varied and depended on the temperament of each individual. Those who chose to leave faced an adjustment to a new home. Those who stayed had to adjust to their changed home and had to compromise their artistic standards.

I have chosen to present four composers and their reactions to the Revolution and the new Soviet government. Their reactions are varied and representative of all Russian musicians and other artists. The composers are Alexander Glazunov, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Nikolai Miaskovsky and Sergei Prokofiev.

ALEXANDER GLAZUNOV

Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936) is the last composer to come out of the Russian Nationalists' School. But coming so late in the movement he rejected the nationalistic style and chose to write in a more cosmopolitan manner. He was a Romanticist, but he showed a preference for classical forms. [2] His beginnings were brilliant, but unfortunately his style never changed. The idea of innovation was foreign to him; even repulsive. He is said to have run from the concert hall of the St. Petersburg Conservatory with his hands over his ears after hearing a piano work of the young Prokofiev.[3]

Not surprising then was his distaste with the revolutionary spirit which permeated Russia around the turn of the century. The political unrest and the revolutionary attitudes of the students at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he taught, so distressed him that his creative talents were stifled.[2] After the Revolution of 1905 Glazunov wrote only a few significant works. By the time the Revolution of 1917 arrived, he had virtually stopped writing.

He stayed on through the Civil War and the early Communist years trying to re-structure the "Leningrad" Conservatory and

preserve some semblance of conventional musical study.[4] But after Stalin's rise to power Glazunov moved to Paris and finished his life there. So devastating had the Revolution been on him, however, that even after leaving Russia he was not able to write any significant music.

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Glazunov's opinion of the October Revolution (1917) was similar to that of his contemporary, Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943). Rachmaninoff reacted somewhat differently, however. Citing the Bolshevic coup as "the beginning of the end" he left Russia under pretense of a concert tour to Scandanavia and never returned. [2]

Rachmaninoff came from an aristocratic home and had cosmopolitan (Western-European) tastes. He identified more easily with the czar than with the revolutionaries and, not being a political activist, the Revolt affected little about him save his domicile.[4] Having lived abroad previously, he quickly settled in Switzerland and divided his time between Lucerne and the United States.

His writing reflected little of the Revolution or of anti-Revolution. In fact, after the initial prohibition on the performance of Rachmaninoff's music in Russia, it was heard and even praised by the Communist government because of its simplicity, clarity and adherence to the principles of Soviet realism.[3]

NIKOLAI MIASKOVSKY

Nikolai Miaskovsky (1881-1950) approved, more or less, of the Revolution of 1917. He war raised in a military atmosphere and had begun a career as an officer. He resigned his commission to study music but quickly re-enlisted at the beginning of World War I. However, Russia's disappointing campaigns and a shell-shocked condition rendered Miaskovsky unsympathetic to the czar and therefore willing to accept the new government imposed by the Bolshevics.[3] Being a composer of some repute he was quickly appointed as professor of composition at the Moscow Conservatory and has been a strong influence on modern composers in Russia.

Miaskovsky was the most prolific symphonist of modern times. He wrote twenty-four symphonies in which may be seen a reflection of political life in Russia and its effects on artists.[2]

Symphonies one through six are Romantic with a Mahler-like quality. The sixth is the last "pre-Revolution symphony and implies Miaskovsky's passive acceptance of the (ensuing) Civil War, famine and distress."[2]

Symphonies seven through twelve are termed "transitional" and represent the composer's search for an objective idiom that would enable him to comply with the artistic guidelines set up by the new government. For instance:

> "the Soviet authorities could not countenance anything outrageous or bizarre or even unconventional, anything that opened up new vistas, made people think, jolted them out of complacency toward accepted norms, or gave them stimulus." (Gunther, Inside Russia Today. 347)

The twelfth is considered his first "Soviet symphony."[2]

And he did well. The communist government left him relatively alone at first because of his world-wide fame. While abroad he had lived in Paris, becoming friends with Igor Stravinsky and working closely with Diaghilev on several pieces for the Ballet Russe. He had also visited the U.S. receiving a commission for the opera "A Love of Three Oranges" while there. The innovativeness of his early compositions had spread his name, though not always in a favorable context, all over the globe.

But the academic freedom did not last long. Scarcely four years after his return the government refused to let him travel outside Russia any more. Directives and guidelines for the creative arts became more specific and restrictive. Prokofiev attempted to comply with these governmental helps and even wrote in support of them.

> "The composer,,.is in duty bound to serve man, the people. He must beautify human life and defend it. He must be a citizen first and foremost, so that his art may consciously extol human life and lead man to a radiant future. Such, as I see it, is the immutable goal of art." 5

Despite his attempt to support the government's views, Prokofiev's writings were usually a compromise between the desires of Soviet realism and his own style.[1] His early works had been characterized as anti-Romantic. Prokofiev described the elements in his writing with these adjectives: classical; innovative; toccata-like (motor element); lyrical; and scherzo-like ("grotesque"). Now his compliance with Soviet directives yielded a tempered, yet Romantic style. He turned more and more to his lyrical side to avoid the criticisms of the government regarding other stylistic elements.[4]

But, as it did to all Russian artists in 1948, the criticism came. The Decree of 1948 denounced and ridiculed nearly every aspect of Russian art that in any way resembled anything Western. To the composers specifically it said:

> "Many Soviet composers, in pursuit of falsely conceived innovation, have lost contact with the demands and the artistic taste of the Soviet people, have shut themselves off in a narrow circle of specialists and musical gourmands, have lowered the high social role of music and narrowed its meaning, limiting it to a satisfaction of the distorted tastes of esthetic individualists." 3

Prokofiev quietly followed further suggestions from the government and in 1949 attempted a "completely-Soviet" work, the opera "A Tale of a Real Man." It too was criticized. The composer, now growing old and discouraged, merely tried from then on to avoid completely any controversial, compositional techniques. The resulting compositions were not his best, of course, and represented "the final ebbing of a once-vital force in modern music."1

But, in an oratorio and vocal-symphonic suite that he wrote in the next two years, he was so successful in pleasing government censors that they awarded him the Stalin Prize in 1951. To further reward his efforts, a Prokofiev Festival was held to commemorate the composer's sixtieth birthday. Prokofiev was sick and unable to attend the festival. And, because of strict censorship, he had no knowledge of world-wide reactions to the honor bestowed on him.

> "Had the composer been permitted to know what goes on outside the Iron Curtain he might have been further gladdened by expressions of homage from all over the Western world. In those countries where neither artists nor works of art can be proscribed by government fiat Prokofiev is revered as a master, as the greatest composer of the Soviet Union, one who has advanced notably the tradition which makes Russian music an art both pungently national and richly cosmopolitan." 1

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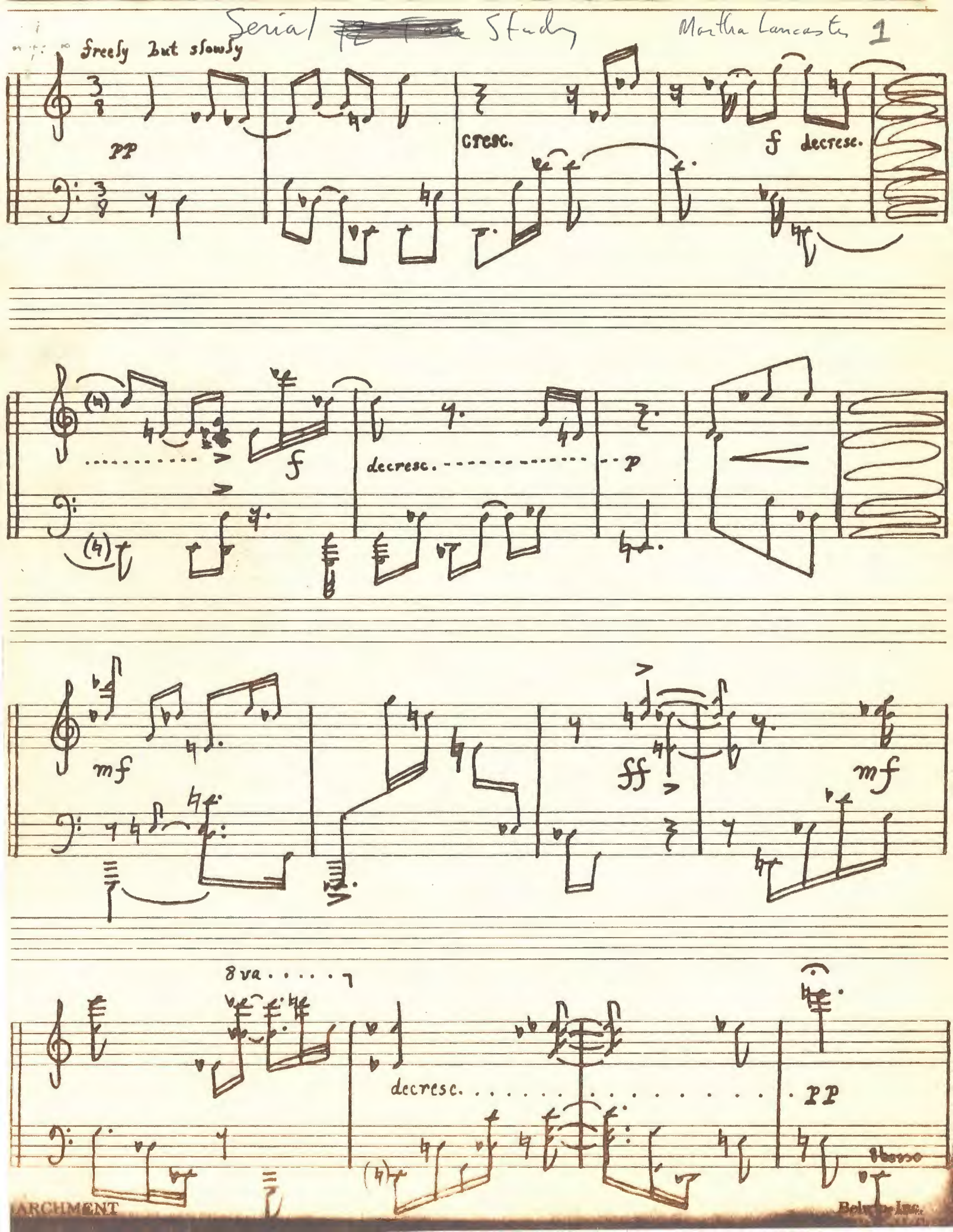
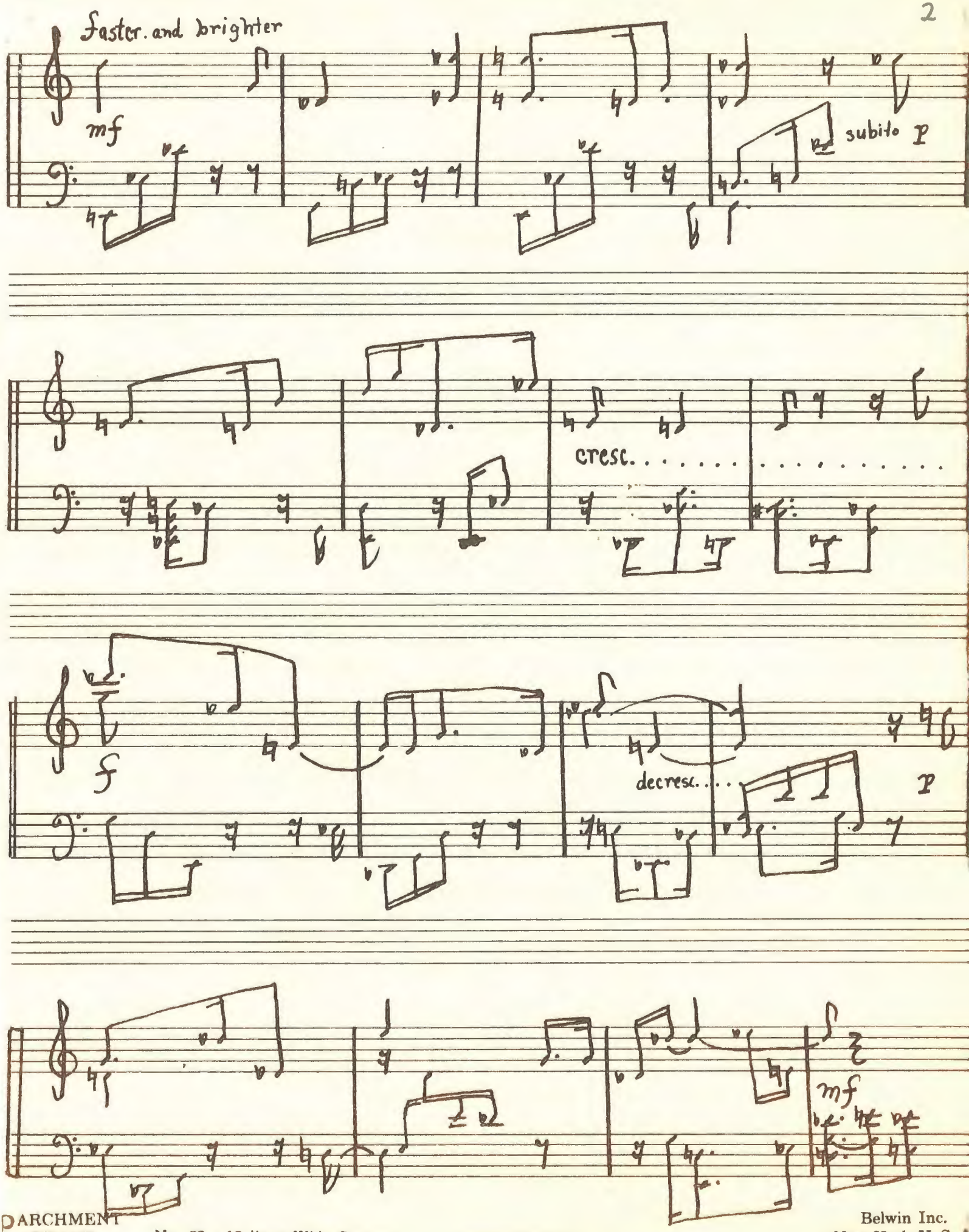
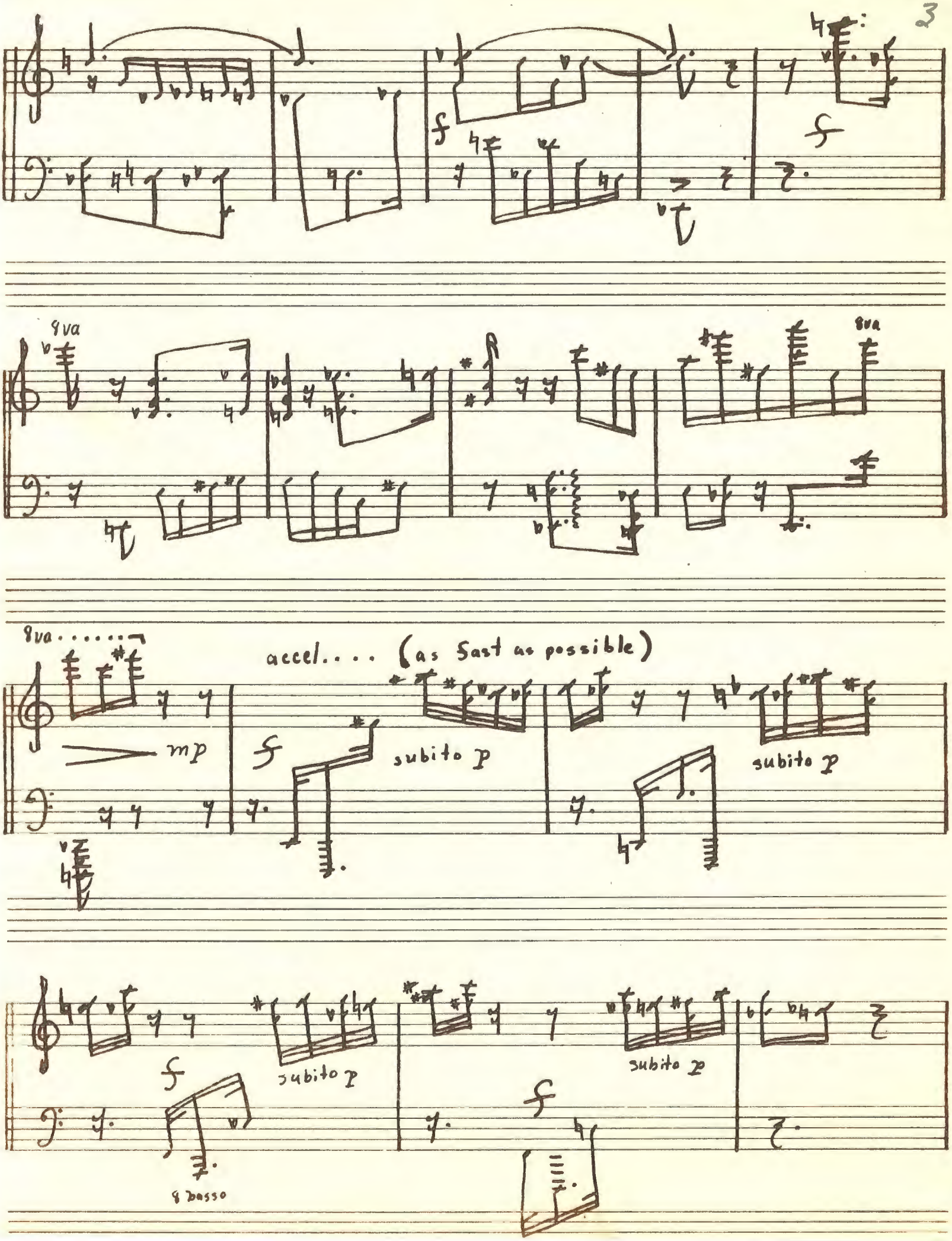
Serial [redacted] Study

Martha Lancaster 1



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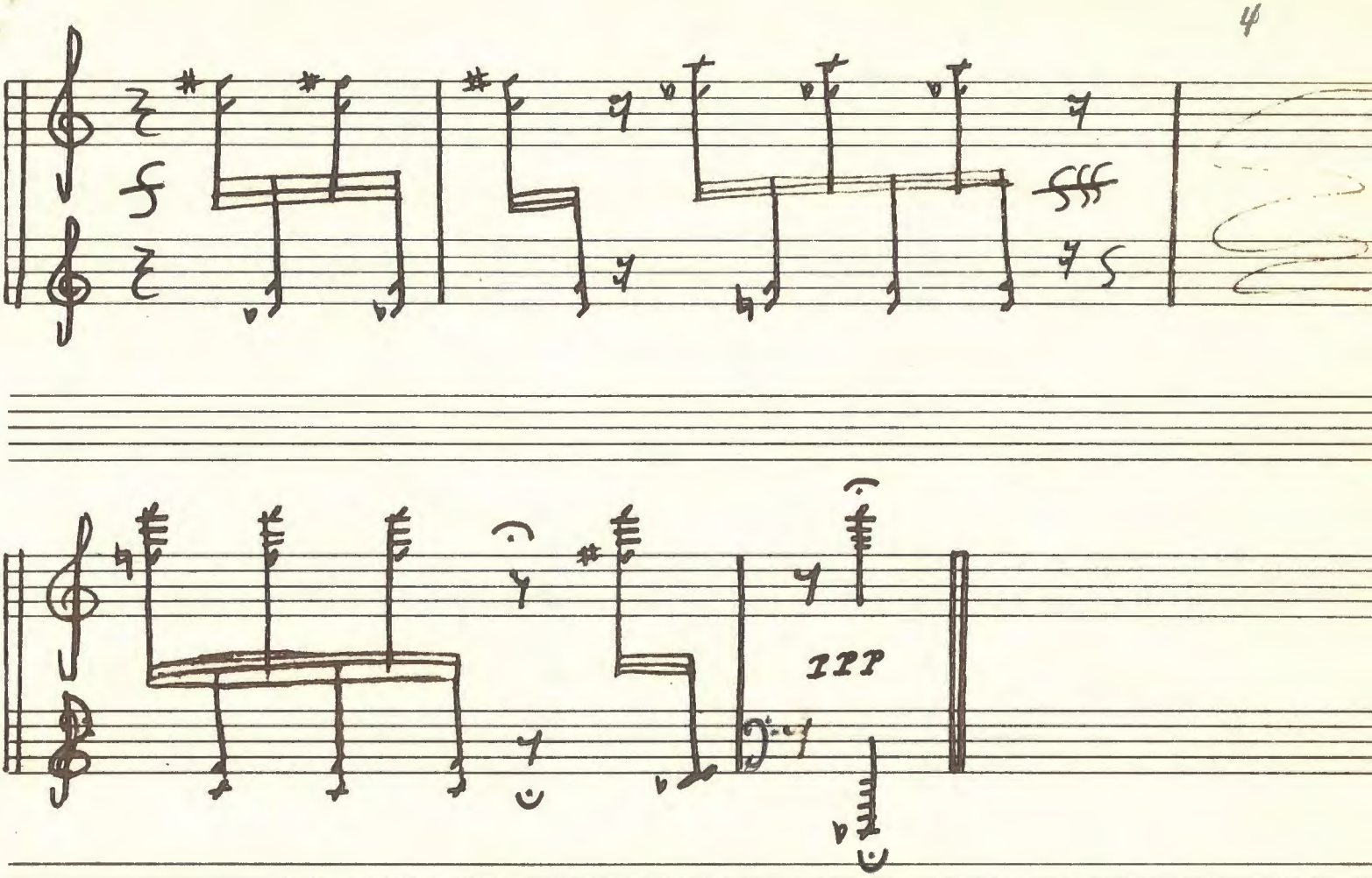
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